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**A Study of Morality Through Life Narrative Research:**

**The Advantage of First Person Perspectives in Ethnography**

**By**

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1. Abstract . . . 2
2. Prologue . . . 3
3. Introduction . . .
4. Literature Review . . .
5. Becoming Moral (Development of Moral Identity) . . .
6. Conclusion . . .
7. Notes ...
8. Bibliography . . .

### **Abstract**

Why is one rational person's "right" another's "wrong?" Narrative and anthropological studies have generally engaged ethics theory obliquely. This paper explores several anthropological conceptions of morality and advocates a focus on first person perspectives in the ethnographic study of morality. It contends that life narrative research is an apt methodology for exploring morality due to its focus on lived experiences. I intervene in the debate by exploring the various modes of being that an individual engages and how these amount to a moral being. I will show how a life story can effectively explore how people construct living and livable moral codes and offer a new concept, that of *becoming moral*.

## Prologue

No no, the military is all about negative now. \*pause\* I joined up to be a chain cutting liberator, like my grandfather, and came to find out we're the ones with the black armbands now. We're the ones stepping on a motherfucker's face for profit. \*pause\* You know, it's like I joined up to be like my grandfather, to go liberate some people and kick the bad guys in the dick and fucking come home to a big parade. You know, not skulk around on little field trips that aren't even acknowledged, doing the devil's work. (16)

What you've just read is a moral judgment. I asked my friend, Gabriel, about good works and followed up with an inquiry about his time in the army infantry. His resentment for the military has grown over the years with his disillusionment with American society. This statement is just one example of how our conceptions of good change over time, how good men come to face moral compromise, and how someone's identity can be defined by and against the things he/she has done. Gabriel is a complex man. This is the story of a southern boy, an abused child, a transient, a soldier, an addict, a criminal, a carpenter, a scholar, and a father. This may read like a list of characters from a novel, but it is one man, one man who has been all of these things and much more.

When I chose to undertake an ethnographic study, I had the scantest idea of what I would write. The man I eventually interviewed and spent time with is responsible for the direction of this project. I only knew I wanted to talk about integrity. I approached an old friend of mine that I had met in college and asked if he would be willing to share his life story with me. I asked him for several reasons: he had long been a role model of mine and amongst our mutual friends, he is an

excellent storyteller, and I had heard enough of his life story to know that I would not be disappointed. When the day of our interview came, on the way to his home I was excited, but when I drove home that afternoon in a gray fall rain the excitement was gone - it had been usurped by confusion, sadness, and a nagging anger. His story moved me in a way that was quite surprising and I wondered if I could ever do it justice while maintaining an academic focus. My emotional response to the process lead me to feel that I had exploited my friend for the purposes of an entry into the academy. He only sought to help me though and never asserted that he felt that way. The story that he told me was sad and ugly and though it comes to a beautiful close, I finally understood (after years of knowing him) why he always kept us laughing. It's because he could make us cry just as easily, simply by telling the truth, but instead chose everyday to create joy and be better.

I wish to communicate his story to the academy in a way that does it and the man who truly owns it justice. When I asked if he wanted a copy of the transcripts, he said, "No, no. I might like to see your paper, though. Just do something good with it." And having spent the last several hours speaking with him about morality, doing "something good" seemed an impossible task. Can a fact, a paper, or a theoretical concept, be morally righteous? Could I use the sad story that I then carried in my pocket to do something good?

Theory can never fully encapsulate a life, can never truly cut to the center of what makes a person good or bad, and cannot expose the moral heart. My intention is two-fold. I hope this story touches you the way it did me but I also hope to explore

the way we think about morality. By talking about the moral, we can aspire to it, we can appreciate it, and hopefully we can understand when and why we fall short of our ideal selves.

## Introduction

Anthropologists have always explored local moralities, though rarely explicitly. More often they have examined issues and practices that are tied up in local conceptions of morality such as marital practices, systems of administering justice, and the ways in which traditional belief systems are handed down. Few ethnographers have set out to research morality specifically, and fewer still have set out to examine the moral lives of individuals. There had been a trend of ethnographers seeking universal moral principles, but as the concept of cultural relativism evolved, this practice seemed more and more ethnocentric. Claims about morality usually reach their carrying capacity at the level of local moralities. I have set out, not to generalize or universalize but, in the opposite direction: to place a single individual's moral identity under the microscope.

Through my case, I will utilize some prominent anthropological conceptions of morality. These different ways of thinking each have their value and can be employed simultaneously. I hope to show that moral life is more complex than it is often considered and provide the beginnings of a framework for understanding *moral identity*. The idea of moral identity is often neglected, but there is a lot to be gained from looking at morality in this way. I will show, by the end of this paper,

how this conceptual turn can help us to understand the social construction of moral identity in a more personal way.

I've chosen to utilize life narrative analysis to show as much of the nuanced agent as possible and understand the contexts of his life as he understood them. But I faced a problem: how to approach my interlocutor from an academic standpoint was a bit of a mystery. To approach him as a friend was not problematic, but what was he to the academy: a veteran, a parent, a survivor of child abuse, a former criminal, or former transient? At the end of the day he is not just one. He is all of them, and that is why his life story is an appropriate vessel to explore the questions of identity that relate to the construction of morality. It is important to note that though this story is not statistically significant it is still worth studying academically. I chose an extraordinary story to tell rather than a representative story for several reasons that I will address in the methods section below. The arc of this paper will follow examine Gabriel's life chronologically from childhood to the present, while developing several key aspects of his moral code along the way. I've made this choice to better understand the various circumstances and influences in Gabriel's life and how he navigated into and out of these contexts.

I advocate an idea that integrates several anthropological approaches to morality which I call *becoming moral*. If we are to offer an informed analysis of the moral failings or triumphs of a man we cannot consider only one opinion that he holds or one decision that he makes. We must consider how he came to be. The concept of "becoming" has been utilized across disciplines in studies of identity, and

usually applies to an aspect of identity that one must embrace and understand. This process allows individuals to make meaning in their lives and see it in the lives of others. *Becoming* has been applied to race, gender, religion, and even politics but no one has looked at morality through the lens of becoming. This is because *becoming* is usually applied to categorical identities, and not to concepts as nebulous as morality. After conducting this research, this concept seems to have analytical traction when we consider how people narrate memories to make meaning in their lives and make sense of conglomerate identities.

I contend that it is not only valuable but also necessary to consider moral development an aspect of identity. Considering morality in relation to the formation of identity must take into account agency; the constraints and resistances of society, culture and history; and the interaction of person and society over time. We will consider how Gabriel reflects on his former identities, how he came to embrace them, and why he chose to leave them behind in favor of new ones. To do this, we will go through Gabriel's life chronologically, beginning with his remarks about his childhood, in an attempt to understand how, from his perspective, he *became* moral.

### ***Literature Review***

Morality has been a major theme as long as anthropology has been studied. Durkheim championed the importance of morality in understanding society. He points out that through the work of collective social consciousness moral systems are created and embraced. He also points out that it is critical to consider the double nature of man: "Within [man] are two beings: an individual being that

originates in the organism and whose sphere of action is strictly limited by this fact; and a social being that represents within us the higher reality of the intellectual and moral order that we know through observation – by which I mean society.” (18, 2001) For Durkheim, society determined morality and normality. Given that there are many moral orders in any given society, that an individual may engage, the task of being moral is more complex than simply inheriting an already determined code of ethics.

Foucault has, arguably, usurped Durkheim’s position as most influential scholar of morality. His project was different from Durkheim’s but he likewise sees morality existing in the realms of normality. He posits that morality resides more in in the domain of *technologies of the self*. (225, 1997) Much of Foucault’s work deals with the ‘self-formation of the subject,’ which he explains is critical work to the construction of moralities. By bringing an agentive subject into the picture we can now examine the subject as it creates itself within the social structures inside of which it exists. He referred to a personal morality that was essentially “an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain a certain mode of being.” (282) This ‘set of technologies’ interacts with several others that are based much more in societal structures, (225) but the acquisition of this ‘certain mode of being’ is exactly what I will be examining in this paper.

Beyond social theory, several anthropologists have examined morality ethnographically. Some of the prominent concepts that have been elucidated by



these writers have been quite useful in the examination of my own data. *The moral economy, the moral breakdown, and the moral project* have all been enormously useful concepts to understanding my subject. Engagement with each of these concepts yields important insights into the life of my subject and the development of his moral identity. Each sheds light on a particular aspect of his story.

The concept of moral economy is best known through its elaboration by historian E.P. Thompson applied the concept to peasant economies during the transition to industrialization in England. Thompson drew on Marx's observation that new relations under capitalism were fundamentally dehumanizing. He argued that as people found themselves working under new and very different conditions from the past, they had to find new ways to define economic and personal fairness. Social pressures demanded that the populous retool historical conceptions of what a good and just society entailed to fit their new and different world. Moral economies are rooted in communal conceptions of fairness that resist prevailing conceptions due either to subcultures changing in time or being circumstantially alienated. This resistance leads these communities to create systems of fairness and reciprocity outside of the auspices of the ruling power structures. (2001) Many anthropologists have found the notion of moral economies useful. In a more recent piece, Quintero draws on the idea of moral economy to analyze drinking on Navajo reservations. In short, Quintero focuses on dominant social structures. He focuses on, amongst other things the 'teachings' of elders, a concept that I found very useful in my own

research. This focus offers an understanding of moral values based in the comparison of societies that exist in a nostalgic past and an immoral present. (2002)

The concept of moral economy is useful in analyzing some elements of Gabriel's life story, because it reveals one way that he comes to critique modern American society. It elucidates why he makes moral judgments about altruism, capitalism, and greed. I find this concept most directly helpful in thinking of the acquisition of values over time from the different modes of life in which Gabriel has been involved. The moral economies he has traded in have been fluid. A single moral economy cannot encapsulate or describe his current position. It is, however, helpful to see the worlds in which he has lived informed by other specific moral economies. However, there is much more to a moral being. Such concepts do not account for the man himself, and only partially account for the way he has changed through time. The idea of a moral economy does not help a researcher to delve into his struggle to uphold specific values given unique dilemmas. For this, I draw on a different concept: what Zigon calls "a moral breakdown."

Zigon quotes Kleinman as saying, "ordinary experience frequently thrusts people into troubling circumstances and confounding conditions that threaten to undo our thin mastery over those deeper things that matter most." Zigon finds this crucial and similarly notes, "It is the ways that we negotiate [these breakdowns] that are primarily responsible for making us into the kind of moral persons we become." Like Quintero and myself, Zigon's research focuses on discourses that address issues of morality, though he specifically examines contemporary Russia.

His analysis relies on some of the same tropes that Quintero's does: an amoral present, nostalgia for a more moral past, and a culturally informed conception of the good life. Zigon, however, is more attentive to the moral dilemmas faced by individuals. He calls the navigation of these dilemmas the moral breakdown. He contends that close attention to the everyday lived experience of individuals greatly enhances our ability, as researchers, to articulate what people consider a morally good life. (151, 2008)

By embracing the *breakdown* as a part of the human condition and exploring how particular agents navigate such experiences, Zigon leans more toward the first person perspective that I advocate. As Mattingly notes, "[this focus] tends to emphasize the singularities and exigencies of practical judgment and the moral struggles involved in inhabiting one's everyday life." (170, 2012) To focus on first person perspective asks what is required of an individual facing moral dilemmas. I find this concept useful for thinking about several phases in Gabriel's life, though it applies best to the moral tribulations he describes himself as facing at present. This theory is very effective in understanding an agent's instrumentality and intentionality, and that is valuable, but moral dilemmas do not exist in a vacuum. Attending only to individual decisions is as problematic as attending solely to claims about tradition. Neither offers a comprehensive analysis. This brings me to the concept of the moral project.

The moral project combines the personal and the social in a way that does not neglect either. As Cole describes this approach, "The concept of moral projects refers

to local visions of what makes a good, just community, and the ways in which these conceptions of community reciprocally engage people's notions of what constitutes a good life, and their efforts to attain that life." (99, 2003) In her study of competing narratives of the 1947 Malagasy Rebellion in Madagascar she explores why personal viewpoints and desires are in constant tension with socially constructed narratives of history in the construction of memories and meanings. She effectively links individual concerns and desires to wider sociopolitical formations. This helps to elucidate the complex interplay of stories, individuals, and situations. It places the agent's selection, use, and interpretation of narratives in the context of their present intentions and desires. She urges a new appreciation for socio-cultural-historical context in interpreting social memory making. (98) Finding that urban, rural, elder, and youth subjects narrate the rebellion differently, she groups the competing narratives according to the moral projects these different groups uphold. I find the concept of moral projects useful, mainly for the way it provides a way to attend to the idealized moral individual as it engages and influences that individual's idealized moral society. Within the analytical framework of the moral project, this is the heart of moral work: an idealized self and an idealized society reciprocally interacting. It allows a researcher to navigate the space between individuals and societies without ignoring the importance of either.

Cole's concept has a great capacity for identifying the site, quality, and intention of moralizing discourse. Her concept is very attentive to the nuances of scale. This synthesis works well for its purposes and has other applications but is

not comprehensive because moral projects are static and moral work is dynamic.

When I consider the life of my interlocutor - depending on the stage of life of an individual, let alone a society, the dynamics of this theory are in near constant flux. It can be applied to any moment but does not address the development of an individual's morality over time.

The moral project is an effective way to understand the moral state of men and groups at large, but Gabriel will be working towards a different moral project in a few years and has worked towards many over the course of his life. This is likewise true of moral economies and moral breakdowns. An individual and a society face different moral dilemmas and trade in different moral economies through time. In the identities that Gabriel has embraced throughout his life, he has traded in different moral economies, faced different moral breakdowns, and embraced different moral projects. None of these account, however, for the entire life of the man, only for his life and choices at any given moment. An anthropological concept that addresses an individual's moral development through time is one that has yet to be developed through ethnographic study. A theoretical concept that focuses on the process of developing a moral identity, by considering the various modes of being and social structures that an individual engages, will be sufficiently attentive to the issue of morality through time without neglecting the roles of society or agent. I return to Durkheim to justify this research. "Whenever we try to explain something human viewed at a particular moment in time – whether a religious belief, a moral law, a legal precept, an aesthetic practice, or an

economic system – we must begin by returning to its simplest and most primitive form. We must try to discover the qualities that define it at this period of its existence, and then show how it gradually developed, grew more complex, and became what it is at the moment under scrutiny.” (5, 2001)

Mattingly argues that a focus on first person perspectives in the study of ethics is advantageous because it embraces a more complex and textured agent than either Durkheim’s biological individual or Foucault’s discursively produced subject. She has called for life-story based ethnographies of morality, and this paper is an answer to that call. She sees “a systematic *under-theorizing* of first person moral perspectives,” (166, 2012) because there is too great a focus on the moral systems people exist within rather than the moral systems they embrace and customize to their own needs. A focus on first person ethics, in this case, will invite attention towards the nature of the subject as it was constructed and as it acts, without neglecting the nature of the subject as it exists within a system. Mattingly contends, as I do, that ethnographic research could be more productive by leaning towards a first person perspective in data analysis and collection.

There has been far less research expressly intended to study morality than studies that have examined it obliquely. Life stories (a specifically first-person perspective) have never been employed to this end. Life stories may be the best way to explore questions of morality. Linde, a linguist interested in how stories are crafted, was the first to define the life story as a means of social science research: “In order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good,

socially proper, and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable, and constantly revised life story." (1, 1993) This social unit of discourse is, as Linde asserts, 'necessarily evaluative' and these types of stories strike at the heart of 'self-presentation' and 'self-understanding' (which, for the purposes of this project, should be taken as inherently moral conceptions). (1993) Maynes outlines the methodology and analytics that go into making sense of life narrative data, and the advantages of this type of data. Life story research is an effective way to explore issues of agency because it reveals the nuances and complexities of an "intersubjective encounter" in time, space, and culture. She asserts, "Personal narrative analyses have the potential to theorize and investigate a more complex and interesting social actor -- constructed through social relations, embodied in an individual with a real history and psychology, and living and changing through time." (41, 2008) There are several types of context that one can engage when trying to understand a life, and life story research directly addresses them by allowing researchers to get as close as possible to these contexts as the narrator understands them. Plummer has called for the use of life stories in ethnographic studies as well. I wanted to divorce myself from the tendency in the social sciences, which he points out, to remove subjects from the process of making sense of the stories they provide. Too often, they are simply sources of data. With life story research they can partner with the researcher, work together to provide a more complete coupling of story and analysis. They can be co-architects of the reality their data implies. (Plummer 1983) I chose to ask my interlocutor directly, "What is your moral life story?" I wanted to

explore how a narrator would communicate his own understanding of how he came to be the moral individual he is now.

The final concept I wish to address has not been used in the way I intend to employ it. The concept of becoming was elaborated by Price in order to analyze why Rastafarians continued to embrace the religious identity after the emergence of the movement despite the social alienation and criticism they would likely receive from the rest of the community. (2009) The concept has typically been applied to either racial or political identities, but I intend to apply it here to a moral identity. The process of developing morality has been widely addressed in the field of psychology and I believe there is a productive synthesis to be had by embracing the idea of developing a moral identity or becoming moral.

### ***Methods***

My research is largely based on a single recorded interview. All follow up questions I posed to Gabriel took place off the record. The quotations have come from a transcript, and the pagination refers to their location in that document. The notes included in the quotations also refer to that document and these notes will not be included in this paper. Several changes have been made to the original content in the transmission into this paper in order to promote clarity and protect Gabriel's privacy. Ellipses refer to moments where Gabriel trailed off, and ellipses in brackets refer to bits of the quotation that have been excised for clarity.

I will explore the content of this interview roughly following the chronology of his life. Several key themes will emerge. Firstly, Gabriel's credo, define by respect,



will come up again and again and how he has engaged it differently over the course of his life. But moral life is markedly more complicated than a single value can entail. Themes of loyalty, self-sufficiency, masculinity, and power also emerge consistently. Close attention to these themes and how they are enacted by him and in the subcultures he has lived in can reveal how Gabriel's moral identity has developed through the multiplicity of circumstances he has faced through the years. I have already mentioned the value of life narrative research, but the nuances of this method require further address. Several key questions need be raised before the value of this research can be fully appreciated.

First and foremost, why this story? Gabriel's story is extraordinary. It is representative of several more generalizable themes in American society, but few people will be able to relate to the actual events of his life. To focus on an individual perspective opens up an analytical space that allows researchers to look up from the smallest unit at how the many social systems have operated on a single case. The fact that Gabriel has embodied so many different identities over the years makes his case particularly ripe for study. Through one man we can examine the effects of many systems. Few people have been through hellish childhoods, homelessness, military combat, the criminal fraternity, university educations, and fatherhood. Gabriel is no doubt a statistical outlier in terms of the events of his life, and that is exactly why his story needs to be told. We can examine how the systems in which he has resided have effected him but also how they played off of each other in him. A person-centered ethnography raises the question of why this man instead of

another, and in this case the answer is that Gabriel's life story embodies the phenomena of moral development that I aim to examine.

The second key question is what effect does the interviewer inevitably have on the research. It is crucial to note that this is the life story that Gabriel told to me. Our friendship began at university. I was away from my family for the first time, and Gabriel took on a sort of paternal role in my life. He was like my father away from home. It was very easy for me to go to him for advice, counsel, and even emotional support. This could go a long way in explaining the arc of the stories he told. It explains why there was such a significant focus on being not just a good person, but more specifically a good man. It explains why Gabriel paid such close attention to the mistakes he made, the state mind he had to be in to make the mistakes, and how he grew from those experiences. He has been a role model to me, and he knows that. The life story he told to another veteran, another former criminal, or his daughter would likely be very different with very different themes being developed and fleshed out through conversation. My interlocutor knew that he was communicating to me about a world that I am not a part of, were he speaking to an insider the details would change greatly. For example he largely glosses over the time we spent together at UNC because I knew him well through these recent years. It is the one subculture we had in common so instead of going into depth he simply explained some of the personal changes he had to undergo in order to acculturate to that new environment. The conversation we had was deeply complex because our relationship is complex. He is simultaneously a friend and

mentor. I am simultaneously an insider in one part of his life and totally alien to other worlds he's lived in. Though I had to speak very little during our interview, my role as the primary audience and the influence that had on the content of the interview cannot be understated.

It should also be noted that Gabriel and I had several other conversations about this research that were off the record. All of the names, dates, and places of this story have been obscured or changed in order to respect his wish for privacy. This also allowed him to be as open with me as he would have had we been speaking off the record. Despite this, he requested certain redactions and told me explicitly that there were things he would not or could not be forthcoming about. At several points throughout the interview I asked for more information about certain things and he would withdraw or dodge the question. I could not get more than a sentence or two out of him about the time between leaving the military and joining his criminal crew. It is perhaps his general reticence that motivated this withholding, but it is perhaps our relationship. The redactions he requested were about other people in his life, whose privacy or feelings he was seeking to protect. This is interesting because he felt safe divulging the information to me, but not to the wider world. He was not ashamed of the events of his life, but certainly wanted me, specifically, to understand him in a very particular way. There is no doubt that this interview was an opportunity to shape my perception of him as a man. That is the nature of life narrative research. The nature of the data is inextricably tied to not only the moment of the encounter but also the relationships of the interviewer

to the interviewee. As Linde noted, a life story is meant to cohere not only for the interlocutor but for the researcher as well. The crafting of a life story is a team effort. The tone and content of it is more about the two people than either one of them alone.

### ***Becoming Moral***

Gabriel was born in the northeast United States, in the mid-sixties. His mother was a hippy who chose to live a transient life. When he was born, she quickly deposited him at his grandparent's home in rural North Carolina. He grew up in a working class home. Gabriel asserts that his grandfather was a critical influence when he was growing up and remains crucial to this day. This man handed down the moral principles that Gabriel still holds closest to his heart. His grandfather fought in World War II and came of age in a very different America than was left to Gabriel and his generation. The following passage highlights several values that Gabriel has held since childhood and begins to open up for examination the matter of how they evolved in the course of his life. This passage also shows other influences in his life at that time that we will explore later. The principles that he associates most strongly with his Grandfather are respect, defense of the weak, non-violence, self-sufficiency and competence.

Good guys defend and protect the weak, you know? Good guys take no pleasure in hurting someone \*pause\* that's weak and indefensible, that's behaving. . . Good guys don't look for excuse to hurt someone or don't need to or don't need to get the, whatever they get out of it, you know. You know, Grandpa never raised a hand to any of us, but he had this calm authority that we all felt compelled to obey . . . . \*pause\* But yea, he familiarized us all

with the swamp. \*pause\* "Nature's pantry, only a fool could starve in a swamp," he would say. And damn, he'd take us hunting and frog gigging and taught us how to swim, taught us how to fight with a knife, taught us how to fight with pistols, and taught us how to fight with rifles. And he dissuaded us against joining the military but told us what he was showing us was shit we might need to know one day. [...] He was a load of laughs. He was a good man and like he wasn't one of those bad Christians that says, you know, "You shouldn't do this and you shouldn't do that. Never mind that I do it, y'all shouldn't do shit, but I do it all the time." He was a clean, noble person, and I got nothing but respect for him and he was a big influence in my life as far as, you know, \*pause\* \*sigh\* who I wanted to be like. (10-11)

This is a dense passage but very relevant to understanding who Gabriel becomes later in his life. The moral framework learned through his grandfather's teachings emphasized self-sufficiency and respect. Despite the abuse he came to suffer at his stepfather's hands, these sentiments never left him. References to self-sufficiency and respect are ubiquitous in our interview, and almost every moral judgment that Gabriel makes can be tied back to these core values. The concept of his grandfather's teachings is crucial in understanding how moral frameworks, at the fundamental level, may be passed down through generations. It was not until later in the interview that Gabriel offered his one sentence definition of moral behavior:

My grandpa always said, "There ain't but one commandment we need to follow . . . That covers all of them." If you look down that list, if you're extending the respect... he didn't say, 'do unto others as you would have them to do.' He said, "Extend the respect that you wish to receive." That was his credo. (18)

He has told me off the record several times that his Grandfather is the only man in a role of authority who ever treated him with respect, which is interesting when one considers that Gabriel has fully adopted this 'credo' as well. He is evangelical in promoting this simple principle. It is clear that he has held it close to his heart for many years, and despite all the difficulties of his life he feels that this rule of conduct has never failed him. We will return to Gabriel's grandfather and these principles several times throughout this paper, but for now I want to return to the narrative of his life.

Gabriel's mother came back into his life several years later. She and his stepfather ran in circles that put them in proximity to a certain organized crime organization, that will not be named here, and they were both drug abusers. Her return marked the beginning of one of many tumultuous and traumatic periods in Gabriel's life. When he spoke of his mother's return I could hear a change in the tone of his voice. He recounts moving from the idyllic setting of his grandparents' home to the unstructured and negligent care of his mother:

Well, my mom came picked me back up when I was four and a half, and we went back on the road. And, not too long after getting back up with her, I got into a box of sugar cubes because in the morning all of the adults would be comatose and I would forage through this shit for something to eat and I found a box of sugar cubes and I ate half the box. Well, each one of them were triple dosed with actual LSD 25s, some Timothy Leary shit.

B: Oh.

G: And did they take me to the hospital? Fuck no, and I remember that shit. I remember it. I don't remember so much eating them, but I remember,

and it was a memory that really stuck out, of everything being calm and blue and happy and my mom's boyfriend at the time coming and looking at me and going \*gasp\* and then dragging her out half awake and saying, out of the tent, and saying "Are you happy now? You fucked his little mind!" and I remember it being mind mind mind... \*echoing\* (1)

This passage is tragic. This is one of Gabriel's earliest memories, and it is emblematic of the treatment he would receive for the next ten years of his life. Upon his mother's return to North Carolina after the end of her rambling travels, Gabriel's life was marked by horrific abuse and neglect. His mother became involved with the man who verbally, psychologically, and physically abused Gabriel for a decade. I will not go into detail here (some of the abuse is enough to make one sick), but suffice it to say that the experience had a profound and lasting effect on my interlocutor. In the following passage, Gabriel talks of some of the psychological and physical abuse he suffered. More importantly, here we can see why some of his grandfather's principles took hold:

One time that motherfucker took me out, when I was eight and half or nine, He said, "I'm going shooting with the boys, Imma take Gabe with me." And at the time, even though he had been beating me since I met him, I was excited. You know how little boys are about guns?

B: Ya.

G: So we go out to John's<sup>12</sup> place and he was the local biker gang<sup>13</sup> leader and Ron was his little comic side . . . comic-relief foot lick. But we go out there and there's all kinds of shit that's been shot all to hell over time, old rusty refrigerators and shit, but there's a bunch of new shit down there, fucking antifreeze jugs and shit like that. So we get down there just in time, they're

about to cut loose on another round. They're like, "Alright come on," so they all \*gun noises\* and they're shooting it all up. So they finish and they're reloading and Ron says, "Run down there and set those targets back up." So I did and I had just about finished setting up all I could see, and all of sudden \*gun noises.\* I mean, like all around me he started shooting. Now I gotta excuse myself, I was eight and a half. I pissed myself cause I was old enough to know what bullets going right next to you meant and I just \*noise\* so it was like five shots and then I hear \*aiii\* like a dog and I looked and John had walked over there and grabbed Ron by the neck meat and picked him up off of the fucking ground and said, "Don't you shoot next to that fucking k..." I mean this is a man with no morals, this is a killer of men and a rapist of women, John, the leader of those motherfuckers, \*noise\* picked him up and said, "Don't you fucking do that. You gonna have to fucking leave." And \*pause\* told Ron to leave so Ron said, "Come on, boy" and we got, we weren't, we had just got out of the driveway and he started leaning over and beating the shit out of me, you know, "How dare you embarrass me by pissing in front of all those guys" \*pause\* you know, I mean. \*sigh\* But he like, every time he got a chance, driving, going home he'd reach over and punch the shit out of me and I was like eight and a half. I came home all fucked up and uh Mom didn't say shit. (9-10)

That someone treated so poorly could manage to grow into a gentle, kind, and quiet man is hard to imagine. This is a telling passage. Gabriel was just a boy and didn't understand what he does today, though he does as a narrator, but what made an impression on him is that a rapist-murderer could heroically step in and intervene when his mother would not. John did a good thing. He 'defended the defenseless' and put a bully in his place. It's no wonder that Gabriel found himself 'allergic to bullies' as he grew older. Nor is it any wonder that he is so fiercely



protective of his own child and of anyone whom he sees bullied. These life experiences were tragic and no human being should be forced to bear such things, but they played a critical role in his moral development.

Gabriel wasn't and isn't just interested in being 'good.' He is interested in being a 'good man.' Conceptions of masculinity color his memories, and are important to analyze. Violence, loyalty, strength, respect, and power are all ideas that Gabe associates with manhood but they are also moral concepts, making his conception of himself as a man a significant crux of moral discourse. In the following passage he talks explicitly about masculinity and his position on bullies:

Well, I'm very protective of my child because of my background and how ugly it can be getting daily whoopings for no reason other than he needs his sadism fix. And he's a little nothing that just knuckles under every other male in the world, "Oh ya you're right, oh I didn't mean to offend ya," I didn't mean it thata way ooohh \*small weak voice\*" with every other male in the motherfucking world. But I was a little male that, that you know, couldn't defend myself, so he would vent his rage on me. \*sigh\* Anyway, when Nancy got much past seven, fucking, my brain started thinking about what was going on when you were seven. I thought about, yea, getting kicked from the barn to the house: kick, thump, walk walk walk, kick, thump, walk walk walk, kick. You know what I'm saying? Ridiculous shit, broke my coccyx so many times, my coccyx is just a mess. It's like this prune down there, it's been busted so many times, getting kicked. \*big sigh\* and then she turns eight, I think what the fuck was going on when... Oh yaa, and then she turns nine, oh ya, and then she turns ten... You know what I'm saying? (8)

The abuse Gabriel suffered helped to shape his ideas about masculinity and the positions he holds on the nature of good and bad action. He sees his stepfather as a fundamentally weak man, especially since Gabriel was, at the time these events happened, a defenseless child. These horrific experiences played a key role in forming his ideas about defending the defenseless and in what it means to him to be a good, strong man. His own experiences strengthened his resolve to guarantee his daughter had a better life. He does not see a parallel here between his early life and hers, but having a child in his care who is the age he was when he suffered this abuse has made him take a second look at those events. This has been a trying emotional time for him, but remembering his own childhood has shaped his notion of what being a good father entails and only deepened his resolve to be the best father he can be. His mother's indifference to what was happening to him has also played a role in shaping the man he is today. In part in reaction to his own life experiences, he is determined to play a very active and caring role in his daughter's life, and it is hard to imagine that his devotion to her is unrelated to the fact that he never received that same treatment from his own parents.

His frustration with his mother has never completely subsided even though she has redeemed herself slightly, in his eyes, by offering him help with Nancy, bills, etc. in the last decade. Despite this help, for which he is grateful, he still sees her as the woman whose terrible choices affected him so profoundly as a child. One of the traits he still finds less than admirable about her is greed. This is a concept that is tied up in Gabriel's moral economy and his critique of the way capitalism is

employed in the United States. Gabriel has no patience for greed, and his disdain carries over into many other moral judgments during the course of our interview.

Greed is ugly, greed is awful. People should share more. People are so concerned, the capitalist way of things about money and shit, you know? . . . [For example] I got a microwave for free, which gave me two microwaves. Well, this friend of my mom's, and kind of mine, was in a bad way, and no money, and behind on the rent and everything, and cooked with the microwave and the microwave broke. And I said, "Well, I've got an extra one you can have." I mean, it didn't cost me nothing, you know? It didn't cost me a dime. The motherfucker who gave it to me brought it to my house, carried it inside and set it down. I didn't even have to pick the motherfucker up. And so this friend of ours needed a microwave and I say, "Here, you can have that," and I saw Mom, like, flex. And he picked it up and thanked me profusely and took off. And mom was like, "I can't believe you didn't get something for that." I said, "Ma, it didn't cost me nothing." "That's not the point. You had a resource, you could've gotten a resource for it regardless of how you got it." My mom is very greedy, very greedy. (14-15)

Greed and fairness are very important concepts to Gabriel, and as we move on we will see many more references to both. When we consider Thompson's concept of moral economy we can see why. In Gabriel's mind, fairness, people receiving the respect they offer, is not only a personal virtue but also a social virtue. The society he learned about from his grandfather, who fought in World War II and had some genuine opportunities for self-advancement upon his return, did not embody the same usury and selfishness that society does at present - more specifically that the American system of capitalism involves at present. When a person has an idea

about society taught to him when he is young and develops other criteria throughout his life, and then finds the world to be very different - evaluating it to be corrupt and/or flawed, he must construct a new idea, socially sanctioned or not, about what fairness is.

Gabriel's late childhood and early adolescence were not purely hellish because Gabriel got to spend a lot of time with his Grandfather, "the best man I've ever known," who became the model for the human being Gabriel aspires to be. This is when Gabe really had an opportunity to learn what his Grandfather had to teach him, and by contrast from the trauma he experienced at home probably served to engrain these principles into his psyche more deeply.

As a young man, Gabriel's moral identity was diffuse and tenuous beyond these core values. Later these principles came to signify much more to him. As in the case of Navajo's traditions (2002), concepts of moral goodness and success held by a previous generation (as passed down through the "teachings") came to shape many of the moralizing judgments that Gabriel makes. Just as on the reservation, an elder's teachings crafted a vision that his descendant could choose to embrace. Acceptance of these teachings empowers those living now to judge the current state of affairs against a past one. When one is aware of historical differences between conceptions of fairness and how they are deployed in society (i.e. his grandfather's generation vs. his own) it can endow them with an authority to pass judgment unavailable to those who are unaware of those differences. But his grandfather's influence was not the only set of values 'handed down' that proved pertinent to

Gabriel's life. He also embraced moral frameworks operating in military, criminal, and academic subcultures – all three of which handed down unique modes of being. These also influenced his moral evolution and the choices he has made during his life. Who he is today is the product not of only one stage of his life but of all of them.

His grandfather passed on when Gabe was fourteen. This prompted him to drop out of school, and take to the road. He became a self-described "street kid." This experience had a profound effect on Gabriel as it served to strengthen some of his core values – self-sufficiency and competence. It also was the first time he experienced a freedom from authority, his appreciation of which would likewise come to be important later in life.

Well yea, that, and I was a leaf in the wind at that point, I mean I didn't want to keep living like I was living cause I wasn't operating from any position of power or control, you know? I was the little fox, little coyote boy, you know? And \*pause\* Going to a place I didn't know any fucking body and going to a mall and, you know, looking around and people didn't eat all their food and throw that motherfucker in there and I would fish it out and eat it 'til I got thrown out. Shit like that. Go out and panhandle and, you know, make a little sign, "On way to Toledo. Need bus fare," and I wasn't going to Toledo and I didn't need bus fare, but \*pause\* just shit like, I mean it was before people gave a fuck. (11)

From this passage, it is evident that the principle of self-sufficiency had become a guide for Gabriel at this point in his life, while not ignoring the wily nature of the animals to which he equates himself. As a “leaf in the wind,” he operated outside structures of authority. Living by his wits, he begged, hitchhiked,

and foraged until he came of age to join the army, making a move to embrace the structure that he had lacked in his youth. This decision was certainly influenced by his grandfather who had likewise volunteered. Following his Grandfather's lead, despite his urgings to the contrary, Gabriel joined the infantry, which threw him into a violent and furtive world that, to this day, he is not permitted to talk about.

But uh yeah, when I got, turned 18 I decided I would join, specifically, the army and the infantry. My grandfather was a infantryman, and he was the best man I ever knew, and anytime we talked about the military or the subject came up he was like, "Do NOT join the military, regardless." You know, "If people are coming to attack this country, join. But don't join up." Well he died when I was fourteen. And uh so, I joined the infantry and uh you know, that was \*pause\* what I needed at the time cause I was a little whipped puppy, you know? And like, I was pretty tough, I had been a street kid and everything, but still, you know, I just shied from violence and everything cause it was such a negative thing you know, and the infantry \*sigh\* you know, you could be... they rewarded you for . . . . the more violent you were the better and, um, you know, conditioned you to hate, actually hate, anyone that they painted with the, uh, color enemy. You know, didn't give a fuck who they were. If they said they are the enemy, I would've attacked nuns and kids. \*laughs\* Would have, no shit. Would've mowed 'em right down and uh they condition you to that point that, you know, your superiors know better and whatever they say goes and when it comes to the enemy there's no mercy required with them. And uh so, had some interesting times in the military. \*pause\* (2)

In this statement, Gabriel explores his decision to join, the motivations behind that choice, his first impressions, and the psychological conditioning that ensued. The masculine and tough nature of the organization certainly held some

appeal, given the premise that he would be fighting on the side of good. And to follow in his grandfather's footsteps was a logical decision, despite the man's urgings to the contrary. It wasn't until much later that Gabriel realized that the work he did in the infantry is more aptly described as 'monstrous.' He and I have had several conversations about the psychological conditioning one endures in military training. It is not an infantryman's job to make moral decisions, which raises several questions in thinking about the formation of a moral identity, questions that I will address momentarily. The only response required of soldiers was obedience.

[The] Thing about the military that makes it so easy is you don't have to think, at all. You have to think on a mechanical level about your environment and manipulating things in your direct environment, and what's in front of you and what's behind you, but as far as what's next - your ears are all the way open, all the time . . . You don't know what you're going to be told to do once you get [where you're going], but you're open to whatever the fuck they tell you. And the morality of the military is, 'do what you're told.'

(13)

Both of these passages are important in understanding how and why Gabriel ultimately defines himself in opposition to the moral framework of military service. The military removes the element of choice and deliberation from morally tenuous situations. As a consequence soldiers lose the critical aspect of agency in the construction of a moral identity. They may become subject to moral compromise, as they have been relieved of the burden of choice. The problem is that within the military's moral framework, as long as a soldier does what he is told, he is then told

‘well done’ and that he has done the ‘right thing.’ This has certainly led to psychological trauma and resentment for my interlocutor. Gabriel’s disillusionment comes across very clearly when he talks about the difference between what he did in the military and what his grandfather did.

No, no, the military is all about negative now. \*pause\* I joined up to be a chain cutting liberator, like my grandfather, and came to find out we're the ones with the black armbands now. We're the ones stepping on a motherfucker's face for profit. \*pause\* You know, it's like I joined up to be like my grandfather, to go liberate some people and kick the bad guys in the dick and fucking come home to a big parade. You know, not skulk around on little field trips that aren't even acknowledged, doing the devil's work. (16)

This very powerful statement speaks volumes about the way Gabriel thinks about his time in the military today. He moralizes with a great deal of authority here, equating the United States with authoritarian regimes and critiquing what he sees as the government’s penchant for violence and military action that is motivated by economic ends. The concept of ill-gotten profit is crucial to Gabriel, as we will see. Most interesting here is that he equates his “little field trips,” by which he means his clandestine missions, with “doing the devil’s work.” It is plain to see that more than a little regret has surfaced over the years for the things he had to do while in the service, and this is a critical facet of what I mean when I speak of *becoming moral*. Gabriel’s moral being has developed a good deal since he decided to join the military, and new and old influences alike remold, in retrospect, decisions that he once made ‘mechanically.’



After sustaining a severe injury that has had life-long effects, Gabriel left the army and took to the road again, living most of his adult life out of his pick-up truck. It took a great deal of mental reverse engineering to undo the psychological conditioning he underwent in his training and in the service. However, what he says about this time suggests that the concept of competence remained critical to him during what was, in retrospect, a moral turning point in his life. He came to define himself in opposition to the role he filled in the military by returning to a very unstructured life. By taking back to the road, Gabe manages to reestablish his agency and make all of his own decisions. This rejection of authority is yet another incarnation of the many steps required to discover a moral identity that functions as it is intended.

Immediately after leaving the army, he endeavored to find 'honest work,' as he puts it, as 'a sort of penance' for his acts in the army. During this period he worked for Greenpeace collecting donations and learned carpentry. Mostly, however, this time in his life is faded and blurry due to alcohol abuse. He found this system likewise to be wanting in the morality department.

I went and I worked for about a year and a half for Greenpeace, out of penance, until I found they were all pocketing all the cash. They were turning in the checks, donations, but the .... any cash they were keeping. And you know, I was very disillusioned with them and went the fuck off and flipped shit over and yelled at all of them and jacked a couple of the boys up when I left. Let them know, you know you know, how upset I was for them giving me shit about my greasy meaty sack of lunch while they're stealing from Greenpeace. Anyway, anyway but... after that I hit the road and went and

hung out with some people from the old days. Oddly enough, the same boyfriend of my mom's, that was there when I ate the acid, was like, "Come up here. I'll teach you how to be a carpenter. So I went up there and worked with him and, uh you know, moved around after that. I mean after living there a few years, I went up and down the eastern seaboard doing jobs here and there and um, \*pause\* lived out of my truck staying at campsites and stuff. That was a great part of my life: no rent, no electric bill, none of that bullshit. (3)

Here we see Gabriel at a turning point in his life. In the performance of his 'penance,' he has not yet rejected violence and passion in the execution of what he sees as moral duties. He also reestablishes and reconnects to the transient mode of being he upheld before entering the army, though no longer as a child. By keeping his expenses as low as possible and not allowing himself to be tied down to a location he is able to express himself in a way that leaves him, as far as he is concerned, firmly in the right (violence notwithstanding). He looks back on this period of his life when he had minimal responsibility and was beholden to no man with a great deal of nostalgia. He has told me that if it were not for Nancy, he would certainly return to life on the road, and logically so, for apart from his adolescence, he had never experienced that sort of freedom.

Once Gabriel had returned to North Carolina and put down roots, he found work scant and when available frustrating. During this period he became disillusioned with honest work, and turned to crime. His disenchantment with the military and 'honest work' led him to accept a new group of, what he refers to as, 'elders' in the criminal community. Not surprisingly, Gabe was not forthcoming

with information about this period of his life, though he did share several stories of note. For ethical reasons I did not pry deeply, on the record, into this stage of his life.

He experienced power and authority in a way he had not before. He was, for perhaps the first time in his life, powerful and his bosses offered a sort of authority that was built on mutual respect rather than blind obedience. For the first time in his life he came to understand the concept of reciprocal loyalty. The loyalty he had offered to his family, the military, and various employers had always gone one way, with the exception of his grandparents. In this community, however, he finally felt that he was being treated 'fairly.' I will allow him to expand on the difference between loyalty in the military and as part of a criminal community below. His criminal 'elders' (which is how he referred to his bosses) handed down 'teachings' as well, undoubtedly originating in their own subculture. The criminal fraternity has its own unique structures and practices, much the same way as the military or academia. His elders taught Gabriel several valuable lessons, though his experiences with violence as a boy and a soldier continued to shade his understanding. The values of loyalty, reciprocity, strength, and power were all reinforced during his time as a criminal. While operating within the cultural structure of the criminal fraternity, Gabe further developed his concept of what it meant to be a good man and a successful person. These values, and the values that he learned later in college, have helped him build a more unyielding, nuanced, and complex conception of what right and wrong means today. He emphasizes the

importance of loyalty and sound judgment in what this period taught him. He added these precepts to the more foundational positions held by respect and self-sufficiency in his set of moral values. He told me a story about intervening (with prejudice) on an assault, where several big guys were picking on one little guy. He was reprimanded by his elders and accepted their advice:

You start thinking to yourself, 'Well, nobody wants to fight a crazy motherfucker, you, Somebody's gonna shoot you.' I had some of my elders in my community say to me, "That kind of shit [bullying], if you feel that strongly about it, go call a cop. Don't do that any [pick fights] more."

B:     Yea.

G:     "Or just go blaze them all out," and they said that very seriously.

"Either just fucking smoke 'em all or call a cop, but if you're not armed don't wade right up into some shit. You don't know what's going [on], you know?

The little guy might've molested someone's little sister, you don't know." And I'm like, "Yea." (17)

This passage is relevant for several reasons. First, it shows that Gabriel acquired some genuine wisdom during this stage of his life. Though he resided in a world marked by violence, violence was now subject to his own judgment rather than that of his superiors. Within the criminal world he had more freedom than he ever dreamed of in the military. This change was not only morally empowering but also crucial to the development of his moral identity. By reigning in his temper and recognizing that situations may be more complex than they seem, Gabriel was, in a significant way, regaining the capacity for moral judgment he had lost in the military.

In the following passage Gabriel compares these two worlds. He returns to issues of loyalty and with that begins to explore the morality of working within the confines of legality in American society:

Yea, yea, don't ever let anyone tell you there aren't any rich, happy, successful retired criminals in this world, cause there are plenty of 'em. I mean, you try to make a decent honest motherfucking living in this world, playing by the rules, you can get fucked in the ass and end up owing a little bit more money every month, if you've got a straight job. Do a little of this and a little of that, you get a whole bunch of money, you don't have to pay taxes, if you get with a good group that you can trust, 'cause loyalty goes both ways, \*pause\* in a good situation. Cause in the military loyalty goes one way. The soldier is absolutely loyal to all of his superiors and they could give a fuck. They'll spend him a like a penny. They'll wonder where the mines are and go, "Unit 207, walk that way. Little farther. Little bit..." Booooooww! "Yep, there's mines over there." Straight up! They could give a fuck about you. Loyalty only goes one way and that's up, in the military. And if you get a \*long pause\* group of people that are looking out for each other, you know what I'm saying? (17)

The issue of loyalty came up again and again throughout our interview. Here he discusses the difference between mono- and bidirectional loyalty. Within a community in which he felt cared for, he found a new mode of being to aspire to, one defined by new conceptions of masculinity, respect and loyalty. It was fundamentally empowering to define himself by this role and the moral judgments he was permitted to make within it. In this situation decisions were, vitally, his. What attracted him most to this community was not the violence, but the fact that among criminals loyalty goes both ways. The value system of the criminal fraternity

made more sense to him than that of what he had encountered doing 'honest work' and in the military. He found himself part of a community that appeared to uphold a set of values that the military or society at large neglected or ignored. At this point in his life he found himself firmly defining himself against these institutions. He had lived in such structures, and experienced the feeling of being a piece of a larger, though corrupt, system. He subsequently found that if he chose to make his own way he would not be subject to or victimized by the hegemony of either the military or the social world in which he was expected to participate.

Reflecting on his time in the military and as a debt collector for a criminal organization, Gabriel had some interesting things to say. If violence and particular conceptions of masculinity tied these two worlds together, his conceptions of fairness set them apart. Now that he has left both violent worlds behind, he looks back in our conversation to consider the decisions he made from the moral standpoint he occupies today. He regrets buying into any value system that allowed violence, since his current position centers on the credo of reciprocal respect, and his understanding of this credo itself has evolved. When I told Gabriel that I respected his opinions about respect, he said,

G: Well, I've earned my opinion.

B: Damn straight.

G: I've waded through different forms of filth in this world. And uh you know, \*pause\* \*sigh\* if everybody extended the respect that they wanted to get we wouldn't have war, you know? On a big scale, we wouldn't have war. On a small scale, we wouldn't have crime - individual crime, you know? (20)

The 'filth' he refers to here is war and crime. 'Filth' is a strong label, and his word choice here betrays his comfort with moralizing about the worlds in which he lived. This statement should not be taken as hypocritical or as shirking personal responsibility. He is asserting that the world would be a better place if everyone acted in accord with what now has become his core virtue. His statement is acutely self-aware because of Gabe's own involvement in these types of 'filth.' This self-reflection is exactly what life story research seeks. Together we came to an understanding about the nature of this credo that neither of us could have hoped to reach alone. Note also that this moral judgment about himself and society strikes explicitly at the issue of scale and the moral development of not only himself but also society at large. This returns to the reciprocal interaction of Gabe with social structures. I will return to this relationship below.

Gabriel's exit from the criminal world loosely corresponded with his marriage and the birth of his child. He had been working in North Carolina for several years when he began a serious relationship with a woman near the region where he grew up. The decision to have a child was very challenging to him. For Gabriel, stability and reliability are ethical principles. They are also values that he specifically associates with fatherhood. Fatherhood added new dimensions to his views about masculinity, as he faced a role that invited self-reflection and new ways of identifying what it means to be a "good man." In his narrative about his life,

Gabriel's decision to become a father reveals itself to be deeply embedded in moral judgments, speaking particularly to the way a person views his place in life.

And yea, I told her straight up, that I wasn't looking to get married and she said she wasn't either. And then, a couple years into it she said I want to have a baby with you, and I was like, "I don't want to have a baby, I'm too fucking crazy." You know I tried to get fixed several times? Shit, when I was your age and they were like, "How many kids you got?" I said, "None" and they said, "Well, we're not doing that" . . . We had a long talk about shit. I said, "Look, I'm crazy as hell. I, you know, if we did go apart I ain't going to be able pay no fucking child support, so I don't want to have a kid because I'm not consistent enough, you know? (3-4)

Clearly fatherhood was deeply tied to a conflict about what it meant to be a moral person. It spoke to choosing a moral identity and sticking with it. There is a sense here that Gabriel has strong ideas about what being a good father 'should' entail. In suggesting that his temper, attitude, and general way of thinking about the world would not be conducive to parenting, he takes a moral stand. At the same time, he acknowledges that his conflicted feelings also derived from the fact that he was still married in his heart to the appeal of a transient life. His girlfriend, who he did wind up marrying, already had children who considered him a member of the family. Ultimately it was their encouragement that pushed him to agree to parenting a child of his own.

G: And straight up, cause she was richer than shit at that time and she was like, "Well I never asked any child support from any of, er, my men. You can ask any of them." And the kids corroborated that, and other people corroborated she'd never asked for a dime. And I was like, "Well uh - I guess I



mean, goddamn I'm - uh I just don't think I'd be a good parent. I think I'm going to repeat my stepfather's mistakes because I hear that's a problem with people that have been abused, go on to abuse, and if I hurt my kid, I'd fucking kill myself because I have a victim's perspective on that ... (4)

Here he voices concern about repeating the cycle of abuse, which shows that at that time he feared not only the unknown but also his ability to control himself. Gabriel had yet to establish a strong sense of moral identity, and the prospect of becoming a father invited an analysis of himself that he had not yet considered. This process forced Gabriel to face fears that had been lying dormant for years, and his concern with repeating the cycle of abuse implies that he is addressing demons that had been hampering his moral development for years. Ultimately, however, he did decide to become a father, and that has been the single most definitive moment of his moral development. Now the most important moral compass in Gabriel's life is his daughter and his desire to "be worthy" of her.

He eventually divorced his child's mother because she unfortunately repeated the cycle of drug abuse with which he was all too familiar. This very trying time sparked a mental breakdown that basically entailed locking himself away in his home and only emerging to see his daughter on the weekends. He emerged from this dark period by seeking an education. He acquired his GED, associate, and bachelor degree in relatively short order. Unfortunately, this has not yet yielded employment. We will return to the fact of his joblessness below. While in school, Gabriel and Nancy were supported by help from his mother, modest installments of

disability payments from the V.A., and financial aid. After several years of shared custody, Nancy asked to live with Gabe exclusively and, according to her, she has no interest in seeing her mother any more. This change in the custody situation, and the increase in responsibility it involved, pushed Gabe even farther in his moral development as he rededicated himself to being the best father he could be.

Honestly. But Nancy, and I don't say this with an ounce of resentment, but she is an anchor. And not just in time and space but in reality and about, like you know, \*pause\* She's been a governor on my behavior, \*chuckle\* and uh, \*pause\* You know, I'm just trying to be worthy of her and oddly you know, I am. (7)

The mere fact of his daughter's existence and the responsibilities that go with fatherhood, which he has chosen to embrace with open arms, launched Gabriel into a new stage of life. Everything he does now, he says, is for her. And this assertion points to a new principle that has come to be crucial to Gabriel's moral identity: selflessness. It is telling that Gabriel was able not only to break out of the value systems of his past but that he ultimately gained the ability to improvise when faced with dilemmas. To accept new values and build on previous systems of morality without sacrificing one's priorities is the ingenuity that the moral breakdown asks us to consider. Creativity in the process of becoming moral is very much tied to developing a moral identity, an identity that builds on values already learned throughout life but personalized to the needs of the agent. The motivation for this application of morality may have come from watching his daughter grow

and develop. In many ways, though she is still young, she has forged her own moral identity.

She's the most reasonable person and she's got her own morality, which is really good, which involves not cussing. I cuss like a sailor all the time. She doesn't cuss. There's a method to that, though, I mean like, she doesn't like to cuss. She doesn't cuss but if you have a kid raised around no cussing whatsoever, it's a shocking thing then they get out in the world and somebody's like, 'hey fucking shit,' you know? The kid shocks out because they've never heard these words before. Throws 'em off, you know? I mean there's been a little conscious desensitization on my part, because honestly words can be weapons. If the kid's never heard anybody say 'fuck you, I'm gonna fuck you up.' No. Stay calm. Look at their eyes. No. I don't know. Anyway, anyway. (22)

Gabe has sought to pass certain things he has learned to his daughter, in a way bringing things full circle. Among them are his grandfather's teachings, but colored by his own experiences and the conclusions he has drawn from those. And that is where we find him today: in sole custody of his daughter, unemployed and therefore fallen on hard economic times but making ends meet, and endlessly aspiring to be the best man and father he can be. Today he faces troubles of several kinds. He pursued higher education with a specific goal in mind: to make an honest living that would support his daughter. Unsuccessful back surgery and chronic pain from injuries sustained during his service have left him partially disabled and it is hard to find good work if an employer is not willing to work around a disability. I asked him what good work meant to him:

Doing something that helps somebody, good work would be, like, teaching an adult to read or, like, mentoring a disadvantaged kid, or going to an orphanage and putting on a fucking puppet show, just increasing the good . . . \*sigh\* Good. \*pause\* Looking out for people, you know, making sure people get a fair shake, you know? \*pause\* People can be profitable without being usurious, you know? I don't know. \*pause\* (16)

These are simple enough replies: education and helping the less fortunate. But it is an interesting answer because we return at last to the idea of being 'profitful.' Gabriel has strong ideas about fairness. Many of his ideas of right and wrong revolve around fairness. He reduces the concept to respect with a simple equation: "would you want someone to do 'x' to you? Then don't do 'x' to them." Basic principles of reciprocity don't allow people to 'take advantage' of one another in the way he means. According to his narrative, worry about and hatred for the 'usurious people of the world' has been building in him since he was young, but his formal education has also made him more familiar with the mechanisms of social and economic injustice in this society.

Walmart came up time and time again in our conversation. Gabriel levels moral judgment after moral judgment on our society's failure to treat hardworking, honest people fairly. His particular concept of fairness and his rejection of people who take advantage of others emerged constantly. He navigates the frustrations that come with the responsibilities of being an unemployed father and the struggles of his own daily life by solidifying his position on the meaning of justice, particularly in regard to the struggles of the working poor. I could understand from this position

the nostalgia he expressed about his days as a criminal: when ironically he could make an "honest" living, by remaining outside the confines of the economic system he considers corrupt. His disillusionment and frustration were plain.

I don't want to work for the Wal-Marts of the world. I don't want to work making some motherfucker with too much money, you know. I don't want to work to get gold trim instead of brass trim on his yacht, you know? I'd like to do something that I'm actually getting paid a living wage for my child and I, and actually do something good in the community and the world at large. \*sigh\* But at this point, if I can't find a good nonprofit that would be willing to work around my disability somewhat, I'm going to have to get on disability, which has been a kick in my motherfucking nuts because I've always been the strong one. (7)

The “wal-marts of the world” is not limited to one particular corporation; he extends the meaning of this referent to include all modern day capitalist enterprises that profit from the suffering and exploitation of others. He often spoke of the massive income disparity in this country and it pained him that many good people may never have the opportunity to break out of poverty due to the institutional challenges the American system of capitalism has established. Having grown up in a working class family he saw how limited the options were, and how easy it was for members of the working class to end up abusing drugs or entering the criminal world. On the one hand, for Gabriel, targeting the "usurious" people of the world is easy, in part because the phrase remains vague, and anyone with a cursory understanding of wealth disparities in this country knows that such people exist. But Gabriel's position on this is also based on values he has adopted over time, that

have brought him to identify and judge some as 'greedy.' In speaking of those who have been part of his own life history, he makes the strongest moral judgments about those he considers greedy, including his ex-wife and his mother. More specifically, however, he applies this judgment in speaking of social issues.

I don't know. In this age of information, I guess, it's getting harder. It should be getting harder for the usurious people of the world to use and take advantage of others when everybody knows about it. Like, all the fast food workers going on strike cause they're getting paid dick. They're getting paid nothing. After taxes, they're getting paid nothing, not survival wages, you know what I'm saying? If you're working full time at the fast food place you still got to get food stamps and shit, and you still qualify for them, working full time, you know? Wow, you know? I don't know and that, and what kind of loyalty is that going to get you? Toward the company and toward the government that allows that? What kind of loyalty is that going to get you? If people were getting paid a wage, where after they've paid their taxes, they had enough money for their kids to have nice clothes, for them to live in a nice, dry, clean place and have food without having to ask anybody for anything, without having to take a knee and ask for public assistance... (20-21)

This statement ties together the objects of some of Gabriel's key moral discourses: usury, the working class, society, and, most importantly, loyalty. Recall how important loyalty has been in stories about his life. I would argue that this concept is particularly crucial to the development of Gabriel's moral identity. Now that he has a strong sense of what loyalty entails, he is rather stubborn in using this principle as a linchpin to level moral judgments. After he obtained sole custody of his daughter Gabriel had to go on food stamps (the public assistance he mentions

above). This decision challenged his conception of self, which for so long had been based on values such as strength and self-sufficiency. Nonetheless, he swallowed his pride by reminding himself of his highest priority: caring for his daughter.

I signed up for my kid and I for food stamps, when she moved over here, because I don't have any income and needed the help. I felt about this motherfucking big, \*holds his thumb and forefinger about a centimeter apart\* you know what I'm saying? \*sigh\* But you know, if crying pussy is going to get food on the table for my child, then pussy it will be. I don't know. I need to realize that, you know, the help I've asked for has been justified and needed. So, I'm not going to feel little about that anymore, its just silly. (21)

The moral judgment he levels against himself is inextricably tied to ideas about strength and masculinity associated with his deepest values. His concept of masculinity has taken a new direction since becoming a father. No longer does he associate manliness with physical power and dominance, both implicit in his attraction to and discussions of the military and the criminal underworld. Now it is linked to the idea that a man does what needs to be done to take care of those who rely on him, and this is more important than proving oneself more powerful than others. This may mean, as it has for him, swallowing one's pride. His words show this choice challenged him deeply, but by focusing on his goals, priorities, and responsibilities he works on these issues. It's clear that he has reached a new and more advanced stage in his pursuit of a moral identity, but that does not mean he is done. He has high hopes not only for himself but for society as well.

At several times during our conversation he raised the issue of a moral society. Through such statements we can locate the relations between an individual

and larger structures. Gabriel has a vision for a better version of himself, but he also has a vision for a better version of society – a society where everyone gets a ‘fair shake’. He struggles with inner demons, but by immersing himself in his credo of respect he asserts that over time he will be better. He sees the same possibility for society as a whole, through the collective action of others embracing the same credo to which he holds. This would make it harder for broken social structures to continue functioning. Gabriel’s moral judgments are situated at the intersection of his ideal self and ideal society:

Where the C.E.O.s are getting paid... Like, a worker working at minimum would have to work four thousand years or something to make what these people make, what these people make in a year, literally. Shit like that, that ain't right. And then, what kind of loyalty are you going to get for that? . . . And the morality, the fucking integrity, just is nothing anymore, is words in a book. In a big sense, if you want to look for integrity or morality or whatever or goodness you're going to find that the smaller the group the more chance of those things coming into play. Large groups, these modern super-tribes, those are just words in a book. That's part of the propaganda, you know, inside and out it's propaganda about, "This is what we are guys. Hey, everybody, this is what we are, not that at all." You know, but \*sigh\* no no, I think the smaller the group the more likely you are to have some actual loyalty, and morality, and empathy. And then, the larger the group, the more likely . . . . large groups, people going to get fucked completely over, at any chance \*pause\* but anyway, anyway. (18-19)

The values Gabriel holds most dear are intimately tied to an ideal society, in which “good” people “get a fair shake.” He returns here to issues we had already



discussed (scale, the income gap, hard work, institutional dishonesty). But here he directly addresses the topic of morality, and he moralizes with a great deal of authority. He is invested in these assertions in a deeply personal way, because by backing up his position he justifies the existence of the challenges he faces today. What he desires may seem out of reach for him but our society is in many ways responsible for that. That is why scale is so important: what he faces is not purely a personal issue, or purely a social issue. The avenues to success available to working class young men are limited. When Gabe was young the military seemed to be his only option. And when blue-collar work failed to yield the results he wanted he turned to crime. It was only when this no longer appeared to be a viable option, because ‘daddy can’t go to jail,’ that he turned to education. Gabriel points out that smaller groups are more likely to display the moral work he’s talking about because when people work closely together, they are more likely to hold one another accountable for their actions. Given the massive size of American society, there is less accountability and therefore more opportunity for exploitation. He deems any mention of morality in reference to these supersized systems merely ‘words in a book’ or propaganda. He seems to assert that any prospect for improvement must emerge at the smallest levels of action.

With this kind of moral discourse in mind he draws several conclusions about the state of the world. His frustration with economic injustice took our conversation in a direction that I did not anticipate. The world he learned about from his grandfather was one in which a hard-working man could truly ‘pull himself up by

the boot straps.’ Unfortunately, due to political and economic reforms that have been enacted over the last several decades, the possibility of becoming a self made man is fading for his generation and those that follow. It was not until he sought education that he learned about the mechanisms of social and economic injustice in greater depth, and this awareness does shape his judgment of American society. His critique of ‘greed’ emerges not only from his own personal experiences but also from what he has learned about the world through the academic work of others. A fair society is one in which the hard working can aspire to a higher station in life and not a constant fight with the downward economic spiral.

Gabriel’s moral project centers on a better future for society, but what about his vision for himself? I decided to ask him directly what he saw as his ideal self and ideal community. His answers, in conjunction with what he told me about his life, offer great insight. In relation to his class, current position, and personal history we may examine his choices, regrets, and experiences in a way that is more empathetic to people who have faced similar challenges.

B:     What do you think you still need to do to be the person you want to be?

G:     Not miss being feared. Not miss being violent. Not miss drinking  
 \*pause\* Not have it pop up in my head so fucking much about me missing  
 these things. Sometimes when I'm feeling small and powerless, in particular,  
 \*pause\* you know? That shouldn't be my go to thought when I'm feeling  
 small, and afraid, and unsure of my child and I's future. \*pause\* That's not  
 when that should pop. That ain't how things... That's not good. \*sigh\*  
 \*pause\* (21)

The way Gabriel chose to answer this question made me realize, in retrospect, that I had asked a deeply personal question. It seems clear that he has rejected these baser desires but still looks back on the time of his life when he embraced them with nostalgia. The desires he mentions here once reinforced his conceptions of masculinity and power, and today, given the new mode of being he has accepted - the role of father, are reminders of his shortcomings. Since becoming sober and a father his notion of what it means to be a man has been forced to evolve. He misses these things partially because they made him feel powerful, but he also remembers the comfort he felt in the communities that embraced such values, such as the military and his criminal fraternity. His ability to function as a competent, self-sufficient man is challenged by the situation he finds himself in today. Analyzing the development of Gabriel's moral identity must account for the dilemmas he explains face him in the present. For the sake of his daughter and their future he wishes to become a man who is more sensitive to the nuances of a moral system built on respect and more informed about the nature of the world into which he will ultimately have to send his daughter. But he does not want to sacrifice the moral frameworks that served him in the past in order to accommodate the present. He is attached to an image of himself that has served him well for many years. He has found that to continue living a good life, as he now understands it, he must let this image evolve.

Gabriel constructs this newly developed idea of himself in opposition to his past. Life decisions that once made sense to Gabriel, such as decisions he made

while drinking or working as an enforcer, no longer do. Looking back, he rejects the moral frameworks that allowed him to engage in such behaviors. His current ideal contrasts with these older selves. He aspires not only to be worthy of his daughter, but also to oppose former identities. He wants to work hard and succeed as the best version of himself, but the state of the economy makes this challenging. The trials associated with sorting out moral dilemmas have greatly shaped the man Gabriel is today, and they will no doubt continue to do so. Navigating the challenges he has faced and is currently facing inform many of the moral judgments evident in the life story he narrated. The choices he currently must make will contribute to shaping his moral identity. The circumstances that Gabriel finds himself in directly challenge the kind of person he wants to be. How he proceeds from here will define the moral being that he develops:

There's a lot of work to be done because I still want to do shit, a lot. I still have impulses sometimes that I reign in quite well. I still want to ring a motherfucker's neck once in a while. I mean, there were several incidences at [school]: these people, barely, barely knowing me, talking down to me or making little diminutive gestures or whatever, I just wanted to break their fucking arm, but you know, they don't know. Ha ha, they don't know what I've been, they don't know the fear that I've caused, and you know that's ugly... That's another thing, yeah I know I'm not a totally great moral person because I miss the fear. I miss being feared quite a bit sometimes, cause it makes you feel big. Yes, having people fear you makes you feel like a big old man and you know what? That's ugly and it takes a long time to realize that. Then, that's technically, you're a bully and in a broad general sense... [. . .] If everybody extended the respect that they wished to receive \*pause\* Wal-mart

employees would have benefits and full time and get paid overtime, you know? I mean, people wouldn't be able to fuck each other over. If everybody, if you [taught] your children - everybody said just when they were getting English, ha 'extend the respect that you wish to receive.' If you go walking through the world being a jackass, you can't expect people to be nice to you. (19-20)

This is a complex statement. Here Gabriel brings together violence, masculinity, empathy, reciprocity, and respect. This statement is laden with moral judgments. Notice that he mentions the fear again, and the relationship that shares with being seen as powerful. Notice also that this awareness is not something he always had. It is something he had to learn over time. This passage largely speaks for itself if one considers where Gabriel is in the process of becoming moral. This acute self-awareness once again segues into discussion of the fundamental wrongness, as he sees it, of American society. He considers his position in life (as an educated, peaceful father), in society (faced with the prospect of working for an institution such as Wal-mart, which exists in order to make huge profits), in relation to what he now sees as the moral failings of his past (as a man who suffered and used violence in the communities he lived in for the first four decades of his life), as well as to his goals for the future (spreading the dogma of respect). After briefly moving to social critique, he falls back on the principle of respect. His ambivalence towards the sensation of being feared is significant. Life in America is violent; and being a man in America, especially as a member of the working class, also involves violence. His connection to his own masculinity and to his sense of

America are historically tied to such violence. His rejection of cultures of violence is the most recent stage in his moral evolution, but he also shows a profound commitment to and faith in his values by aspiring to proselytize the dogma of respect. This passage provides a picture of Gabriel in the process of becoming moral, but it is just another step on the road to a more actualized moral being. But his story is not purely one of refashioning a moral being. It is also very much a return to and realization of a foundational moral code, that of his grandfather. We can understand how Gabriel became moral simultaneously as a narrative of oppositional but also as a recognition of a traditional form that requires adaptation to a new and different world.

### **Conclusion**

A life narrative approach to the formation of morality employs a first person perspective. But speaking to a single person does not preclude attention to society. A life story is not complete without being situated in a broader narrative that illuminates the ways in which social forces affect individual actors. Not all individuals have equally good insights into the social world that shapes them, but if there is a framework for understanding the insights they do have, an analyst may be able to draw telling conclusions about the nature of the moral being at hand and the systems that shaped it. One may specifically address how the interaction between this individual and the social structures in which he resides helps to mold the moral landscape in which he lives. Thinking in terms of *becoming moral* is one step towards analytically navigating the space between agency and structure when

considering issues of morality. It is difficult, however to generalize on the basis of a single case study. Nonetheless, my analysis of Gabriel's narrative suggests the value of thinking about morality as a key theme in a life story. In this respect, it points to a new direction for anthropologists, and for the empirical study of ethics.

It cannot be forgotten that individuals actively draw together values from different domains of experience, each of which reflects distinct moral worlds — this is the moral creativity that no other anthropological conception of morality has yet accounted for. Understanding moral judgments and frameworks is a critical aspect to ethnographic research because, though we may aspire to unbiased neutrality, a researcher cannot be divorced from the collection or analysis of their data.

Examining morality from a first person perspective can lead to greater depth in ethnographic data. If the process of *becoming moral* is accepted as something that every human being goes through, researchers and readers will have a new analytical tool to understand individuals, communities, and societies at large. If morality is considered a facet of identity that everyone must come to terms with people can enhance their ability to understand how different individual's experiences and motivations can be.

The first time I presented my research, someone asked me, "You said at the beginning that you had made a moral judgment of your interlocutor, that he was a good man. Did that conception change over the course of your research?" I was completely surprised by the question and felt bad that I may have indicated that in any way. I responded that it absolutely had not, that it had in fact amplified my

opinion of him as a good man and greatly enhanced the respect that I had for him. This is because every morally tenuous decision he may have made in his life emerged from his best understanding of what was right at the time based on a steadfast commitment to his values. In any case where I might have rushed to judge him, he was operating under a moral identity that permitted his actions. Of course, learning to understand yourself is a process and actualizing the moral person that you wish to be is a life long endeavor.

Gabriel emerged from a truly hellish childhood damaged. To unlearn and understand traumas and the lessons that traumas teach is a process no one should have to undergo alone, and largely Gabriel has. Despite this, he exists today with hope, determination and a faith in his moral sense that most would find enviable. Several of the stories Gabriel told me affected me in a deeply emotional way, and though I got to know him a lot better by embarking on this project I only know the individual that has shown himself to me. To say I know the man entirely would be foolish. I do, however, have a much greater knowledge of his moral inclinations than I did at the onset. The process of this research has meant a great deal to me. I did not expect the story I collected to be as intense or unbelievable as it turned out to be, but improbable circumstances followed Gabriel throughout his entire life. Despite the violence he may have perpetrated, the fear he may have inspired, the destructive drugs he may have taken, and the suffering, unimaginable to most, that he has endured, he has come to be one of the most wonderful, thoughtful, and humble people that I know and a truly *good* father. The decisions he has made were



his own and without understanding his life in a deeper more empathetic way I might have written him off as a 'bad' man. That is one of the reasons this project has meant so much to me personally, but the real value of this research is in the significance of the methodology.

I am advocating for the use of first-person perspectives in ethnography. My thesis is about morality, but there is a lot more to questions of morality than right, wrong and people's ability to make those judgments. In anthropology morality has generally been studied obliquely. I set out to examine it as directly as possible. In exploring the literatures, I realized, that no other ethnographer has examined morality from a first person perspective. I studied the moral development of one man through life narrative research methods. The topic of this study was not the moral nature of a community, but of the way one particular man communicates his moral life story to another particular man. It is important to note that the two of us defined the moral life story that Gabriel gave me. Our interview by its nature was a one on one communication. With such a narrow focus we can examine the wider issues of morality and how societies impart morality on the molecular individual. By studying the smallest unit we can then draw more authoritative conclusions about the larger systems in which it operates. My interlocutor has embraced a multiplicity of identities and social systems to live in. Life narrative research allows us to examine how all of these things can come together to form a coherent story. By embracing the idea of becoming moral or the idea of developing a moral identity we

can better navigate the highly complex intellectual space that ethnographies of morality address.

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